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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TOKYO 001440

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON ETRD EFIN MARR KN CH JA
SUBJECT: KOMEITO PARTY SUPPORT CRUCIAL TO LDP'S
RULING-PARTY STATUS, BUT ASKS LITTLE IN RETURN

REF: 05 TOKYO 06701

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Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons:1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The once center-left Komeito party is slowly moving toward the right, Embassy contacts tell us, and that trend is unlikely to change even if Komeito President Kanzaki decides to step down later this year. Although the New Komeito Party's support has been crucial to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), both for its votes in the Diet and assistance in national elections, the party has not sought to leverage its support on policies beyond social welfare issues. Komeito backing for the more conservative PM Koizumi's policies sometimes causes friction with the party's Soka Gakkai-member supporters, but Komeito prefers to persuade the lay Buddhist organization's members to accept the government's policies, rather than confront the LDP. Komeito opposes the LDP on constitutional reform, upgrading the Defense Agency to a ministry, and revision of the Basic Education Law. Our Komeito interlocutors are confident, however, that inter-party discussions will eventually resolve those issues. End Summary.

Key Electoral Support

¶2. (C) Since 1997 the LDP has needed Komeito Diet members' votes to form a majority in the Upper House. However, more importantly, the LDP has also become dependent on the Komeito party's backing of LDP candidates in Diet elections for both houses. Since joining the ruling coalition, Komeito has urged its supporters to vote for LDP candidates in single-seat races where there is no Komeito candidate. Disciplined block voting by the roughly 10 million members of Soka Gakkai (the lay Buddhist organization that founded the Komeito in 1964) has thus become an indispensable political asset for the LDP. A Komeito contact quoted former PM Mori as saying that Komeito support for LDP candidates provided the winning margin in 91 races in the September 2005 Lower House elections. The Komeito party believes that the circumstances of that election, in which PM Koizumi's personal charisma attracted an unusually large number of swing voters, is unlikely to be repeated in future elections, a development that will lock in Komeito's influence over the LDP.

Little Policy Influence

¶13. (C) In return for its electoral and Diet support Komeito has obtained only a limited degree of influence over government policy. Most of Komeito's influence is confined to welfare issues, a top priority of the party's Soka Gakkai adherents. Komeito Diet Member Otohiko Endo confided to Embassy Tokyo political officer that he would like to see Komeito expand its influence over a wider area of issues. But when pressed on what policies he would like to see greater Komeito input, Endo could only name increased aid for education and job training to boost employment opportunities and narrow the gap between lower and middle income groups -- the general issue area in which Komeito has long taken an interest. Endo said that although he believes Komeito is too meek in its relationship with the LDP, there is no widespread feeling within Komeito that it should seek a stronger role in the ruling coalition.

Responsible and Pragmatic

¶14. (C) In a separate meeting, Komeito Diet Member Isamu Ueda stated there was a significant convergence of views between Komeito and the LDP. He acknowledged that Soka Gakkai's concern for welfare issues and strong support of pacifism might seem an unlikely fit with the more conservative LDP, but averred that Komeito was never an ideological leftist party. Ueda stated that the wide range of views among LDP Diet members provided a significant overlap on most issues with Komeito.

¶15. (C) Ueda observed that since joining the ruling coalition Komeito has had to give up the "luxury" of taking populist

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stands critical of government policy. He noted that Party President Kanzaki objects to PM Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni shrine, but has, in effect, acquiesced to the visits, saying relatively little. The party takes a responsible, pragmatic approach on the issues, Ueda insisted, and works diligently with its more idealistic Soka Gakkai supporters to persuade them of the merits of the government's policies. He noted that Komeito persuaded its pacifist supporters that sending Self Defense Force personnel to Iraq was the right thing to do. Party leaders argued that talking about peace was not sufficient; Japan has a responsibility to contribute to efforts that produce the conditions for peace, Ueda said. One Komeito objective, he acknowledged, is to restrain the right-wing tendencies of some LDP Diet members.

¶16. (C) Komeito International Affairs Bureau Chief Toshihisa Koganeya confided to us that he felt the Komeito party was moving "step-by-step from center-left to center-right." He thought that North Korea's missile tests and abductions of Japanese citizens, as well as the emergence of China, had influenced the thinking of many Komeito supporters. Asked about Komeito's ties with the Chinese Communist Party, he acknowledged the relationship, but said China could never be an ally of Japan's as there is no agreement on fundamental values. Koganeya stated that Komeito was generally comfortable with the policy direction of the LDP, but noted three issues on which his party disagreed with the LDP: Constitutional revision, upgrading the Japan Defense Agency (JDA) to a ministry, and revision of the Basic Education Law.

Constitutional Reform

¶17. (C) Komeito is not opposed to constitutional reform in principle, Koganeya stated, but it would prefer to amend each article separately, in the U.S. fashion, rather than re-draft the entire Constitution. Komeito believes that rightists in

the LDP see the constitutional redrafting exercise as a step in reasserting Japan's military power. Komeito is particularly concerned about changes to pacifist Article 9, which prohibits Japan from maintaining military forces.

While the LDP has proposed new, more robust language for the article's second clause (reftel), Komeito would keep the existing two clauses, but add a third clause that recognizes the existence of the Self Defense Forces and provides for participation in international peacekeeping operations.

However, unlike the LDP, Komeito does not favor permitting Japan to exercise the right of collective self defense.

Komeito Diet Member Ueda told us that although the two parties would appear to be at loggerheads over the issue, he believes the problem is manageable. Ueda is confident that language can be negotiated to the satisfaction of both parties. Moreover, it is not an immediate problem. Ueda noted that Komeito is not due to present its draft proposals for constitutional revision until November, and given the need to reach agreement with the opposition Democratic Party of Japan to obtain the required two-thirds majority in the Diet, he expects the constitutional revision process to take years.

JDA Upgrade

¶8. (C) According to party staffer Koganeya, the Komeito party is not opposed to upgrading the JDA to a ministry, but it is taking a cautious stance on the issue. He told us that many Komeito Diet members understand the need for the upgrade, recognizing that a minister's greater influence and authority would be appropriate for the JDA given Japan's security situation. However, the current bid-rigging scandal must be resolved before any consideration can be given to upgrading the agency, he insisted. The two parties are currently discussing what must be done to prevent further such abuse.

Education Law Revision

¶9. (C) The LDP has proposed revising the Basic Education Law, but Komeito feels revision is unnecessary. Diet Member

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Endo explained that some right-wing LDP members, who object to the existing legislation because of its U.S. origin in the wake of World War II, would use the Education Law's revision to revive support for Japanese militarism. LDP proponents of the revision claim that a lack of patriotism is responsible for much of what ails Japan, he stated, while the Komeito party faults problems in the family, community and government bureaucracy. Endo noted that despite its objections, Komeito has consented to revising the legislation. However, discussions between the two parties are stuck over the expression of patriotism in the draft bill. The LDP would use the phrase "kuni wo aisuru kokoro" or the spirit of loving our nation, while Komeito has countered with "kuni wo taisetsuni suru kokoro" or the spirit of cherishing our nation. Endo believes there is an even chance the bill will be passed in the current session.

Focus on Welfare Issues

¶10. (C) According to Diet Member Ueda, despite Komeito's interest in expanding welfare services, the party has strongly supported PM Koizumi's administrative reform proposals for reducing the size of government. He explained that Komeito understands the government's budgetary pressures and is interested in boosting governmental efficiency. Otherwise, he stated, the government would not have the resources to provide welfare benefits.

¶11. (C) Having influence over how welfare benefits and other government services are cut back is important to Komeito.

Party staffer Koganeya told us Komeito advanced a practical suggestion for dividing discussion of administrative reform into four areas: services the government should provide, services the government should not provide, services that should be provided by local government and services that should be provided by the private sector. PM Koizumi has accepted this approach Koganeya said, and the two parties are currently discussing the issues under that framework. One reform proposal that troubles Komeito is the integration and reorganization of eight government-affiliated financial institutions. Komeito is concerned that this effort will reduce the amount of credit available to small- and medium-size businesses, particularly in rural areas.

¶12. (C) Komeito is also strongly interested in boosting the benefits paid to parents for raising children. Concerned about Japan's declining birth rate, Komeito wants to increase the monthly stipend paid for each child and lengthen the benefit term from 9 to 12 years and is discussing further lengthening the term to 18 years.

Change in Leadership?

¶13. (C) Our Komeito contacts insist that recent press reports of Komeito President Kanzaki stepping down at the end of his term in November are premature. However, Diet Member Ueda admitted that after eight years, Kanzaki may well decide

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to relinquish the position. He acknowledged that Kanzaki and Secretary General Fuyushiba have led the party gently toward

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the right as coalition partners of the Koizumi government, but thought there was little chance a successor would move the party in another direction. There are no issues pulling the party to the left, he asserted. Although our contacts declined to speculate on the matter, the major uncertainty facing the party is the effect the sudden demise of Soka Gakkai's aging, charismatic president, Daisaku Ikeda, would have on Komeito.

SCHIEFFER